

THE DISCOURSE OF THE TEACHING BEQUEATHED BY THE BUDDHA

(just before His Parinibbana)

*Translated into Chinese by the Indian Acarya Kumarajiva sometime prior to the year 956
Buddhist Era.* [\[1\]](#)

I. OCCASION

WHEN LORD BUDDHA, Sage of the Sakyas, first turned the Wheel of the Dhamma, Venerable Annakondanna crossed over (the ocean of birth and death); while as a result of his last Discourse Venerable Subhadda crossed over likewise. All those who were (ready) to cross over, then he (helped) to cross over. When about to attain Final Nibbana, he was lying between the twin sala trees in the middle watch of the night. No sound disturbed the calm and silence; then, for the sake of the disciples (savaka), he spoke briefly on the essentials of Dhamma:

II. ON THE CULTIVATION OF VIRTUE IN THIS WORLD

1. Exhortation on keeping the Precepts

O bhikkhus, after my Parinibbana you should reverence and honor the Precepts of the Patimokkha. Treat them as a light which you have discovered in the dark, or as a poor man would treat a treasure found by him. You should know that they are your chief guide and there should be no difference (in your observance of them) from when I yet remained in the world. If you would maintain in purity the Precepts, you should not give yourselves over to buying, selling or barter. You should not covet fields or buildings, nor accumulate servants, attendants or animals. You should flee from all sorts of property and wealth as you would avoid a fire or a pit. You should not cut down grass or trees, neither break new soil nor plough the earth. Nor may you compound medicines, practice divination or sorcery according to the position of the stars, cast horoscopes by the waxing and waning of the moon, nor reckon days of good fortune. All these are things which are improper (for a bhikkhu).

Conduct yourselves in purity, eating only at the proper times and living your lives in purity and solitude. You should not concern yourselves with worldly affairs, nor yet circulate rumors. You should not mumble incantations, mix magic potions, nor bind yourselves in friendship to powerful persons, showing to them and the rich (special) friend-liness while treating with contempt those lacking (in worldly wealth, power and so forth). All such things are not to be done!

You should seek, with a steadfast mind, and with Right Mindfulness (samma sati), for Enlightenment. Neither conceal your faults (within), nor work wonders (without), thereby leading (yourself and) other people astray. As to the four offerings, be content with them, knowing what is sufficient. Receive them when offered but do not hoard them. This, briefly, is what is meant by observing the Precepts. These Precepts are fundamental (to a life based on Dhamma-Vinaya) and accord exactly with freedom (mokkha), and so are called the Patimokkha. By relying on them you may attain all levels of collectedness (samadhi) and likewise the knowledge of the extinction of dukkha (unsatisfactoriness). It is for this reason, bhikkhus, that you should always maintain the Precepts in purity and never break them. If you can keep these Precepts pure you possess an

excellent (method for the attainment of Enlightenment), but if you do not do so, no merit of any kind will accrue to you. You ought to know for this reason that the Precepts are the chief dwelling-place of the merit which results in both body and mind (citta) being at rest.

2. Exhortation on the control of Mind and Body.

O bhikkus, if you are able already to keep within the Precepts, you must next control the five senses, not permitting the entry of the five sense desires by your unrestraint, just as a cowherd by taking and showing his stick prevents cows from entering another's field, ripe for the harvest. In an evil-doer indulging the five senses, his five desires will not only exceed all bounds but will become uncontrollable, just as a wild horse unchecked by the bridle must soon drag the man leading it into a pit. If a man be robbed, his sorrow does not extend beyond the period of his life but the evil of that robber (sense-desires) and the depredations caused by him bring calamities extending over many lives, creating very great dukkha. You should control yourselves!

Hence, wise men control themselves and do not indulge their senses but guard them like robbers who must not be allowed freedom from restraint. If you do allow them freedom from restraint, before long you will be destroyed by Mara. The mind is the lord of the five senses and for this reason you should well control the mind. Indeed, you ought to fear indulgence of the mind's (desires) more than poisonous snakes, savage beasts, dangerous robbers or fierce conflagrations. No simile is strong enough to illustrate (this danger). But think of a man carrying a jar of honey who, as he goes, heeds only the honey and is unaware of a deep pit (in his path)! Or think of a mad elephant unrestrained by shackles! Again, consider a monkey who after climbing into a tree, cannot, except with difficulty, be controlled! Such as these would be difficult to check; therefore hasten to control your desires and do not let them go unrestrained! Indulge the mind (with its desires) and you lose the benefit of being born a man; check it completely and there is nothing you will be unable to accomplish. That is the reason, O bhikkhus, why should strive hard to subdue your minds.

3. Exhortation on the moderate use of food.

O bhikkhus, in receiving all sorts of food and drinks, you should regard them as if taking medicine. Whether they be good or bad, do not accept or reject according to your likes and dislikes; just use them to support your bodies, thereby staying hunger and thirst. As bees while foraging among the flowers extract only the nectar, without harming their color and scent, just so, O bhikkhus, should you do (when collecting alms-food). Accept just enough of what people offer to you for the avoidance of distress. But do not ask for much and thereby spoil the goodness of their hearts, just as the wise man, having estimated the strength of his ox, does not wear out its strength by overloading.

4. Exhortation on sleeping.

O bhikkhus, by day you should practice good Dhamma and not allow yourselves to waste time. In the early evening and late at night do not cease to make an effort, while in the middle of the night you should chant the Suttas to make yourselves better informed. Do not allow yourselves to pass your lives vainly and fruitlessly on account of sleep. You should envisage the world as being consumed by a great fire and quickly determine to save yourselves from it. Do not (spend much time in) sleep! The robbers of the three afflictions forever lie in wait to kill men so that (your danger) is even greater than in a household rent by hatred. So, fearful, how can you sleep and not arouse yourselves? These afflictions are a poisonous snake asleep in your own hearts. They are

like a black cobra sleeping in your room. Destroy the snake quickly with the sharp spear of keeping to Precepts! Only when that dormant snake has been driven away will you be able to rest peacefully. If you sleep, not having driven it away, you are men without shame (hiri). The clothing of shame (hiri) among all ornaments, is the very best. Shame can also be compared to an iron goad that can control all human wrong-doing; for which reason, O bhikkhus, you should always feel ashamed of unskillful actions (akusalakamma). You should not be without it even for a moment, for if you are parted from shame, all merits will be lost to you. He who has fear of blame (ottappa) has that which is good, while he who has no fear of blame (anottappa) is not different from the birds and beasts.

5. Exhortation on refraining from anger and ill will.

O bhikkhus, if there were one who came and dismembered you joint by joint, you should not hate him but rather include him in your heart (of friendliness -- metta). Besides, you should guard your speech and refrain from reviling him. If you succumb to thoughts of hatred you block your own (progress in) Dhamma and lose the benefits of (accumulated) merits. Patience (khanti) is a virtue which cannot be equaled even by keeping the Precepts and (undertaking) the Austere Practices. Whosoever is able to practice patience can be truly called a great and strong man, but he who is unable to endure abuse as happily as though he were drinking ambrosia, cannot be called one attained to knowledge of Dhamma. Why is this? The harm caused by anger and resentment shatters all your goodness and so (greatly) spoils your good name that neither present nor future generations of men will wish to hear it. You should know that angry thoughts are more terrible than a great fire, so continually guard yourselves against them and do not let them gain entrance. Among the three robbers (the afflictions), none steals merit more than anger and resentment: Those householders dressed in white who have desires and practice little Dhamma, in them, having no way to control themselves, anger may still be excusable; but among those become homeless (pabbajjita) because they wish to practice Dhamma and to abandon desire, the harboring of anger and resentment is scarcely to be expected, just as one does not look for thunder or lightning from a translucent, filmy cloud.

6. Exhortation on refraining from arrogance and contempt.

O bhikkhus, rubbing your heads you should deeply consider yourselves in this way: 'It is good that I have discarded personal adornment. I wear the russet robe of patches and carry a bowl with which to sustain life.' When thoughts of arrogance or contempt arise, you must quickly destroy them by regarding yourselves in this way. The growth of arrogance and contempt is not proper among those wearing white and living the household life: how much less so for you, gone forth to homelessness! You should subdue your bodies, collecting food (in your bowls) for the sake of Dhamma-practice to realize Enlightenment.

7. Exhortation on flattery.

O bhikkhus, a mind inclined to flattery is incompatible with Dhamma, therefore it is right to examine and correct such a mind. You should know that flattery is nothing but deception, so that those who have entered the way of Dhamma-practice have no use for it. For this reason, be certain to examine and correct the errors of the mind, for to do so is fundamental.

III. ON THE ADVANTAGES FOR GREAT MEN GONE FORTH TO HOMELESSNESS.

1. The virtue of few wishes.

O bhikkhus, you should know that those having many desires, by reason of their desire for selfish profit, experience much dukkha. Those with few desires, neither desiring nor seeking anything, do not therefore experience such dukkha. Straight-away lessen your desires! Further, in order to obtain all kinds of merit you should practice the fewness of desires. Those who desire little do not indulge in flattery so as to away another's mind, nor are they led by their desires. Those who practice the diminishing of desires thus achieve a mind of contentment having no cause for either grief or fear and, finding the things they receive are sufficient, never suffer from want. From this cause indeed, (comes) Nibbana. Such is the meaning of 'having few wishes.'

2. The virtue of contentment.

O bhikkhus, if you wish to escape from all kinds of dukkha, you must see that you are contented. The virtue of contentment is the basis of abundance, happiness, peace and seclusion. Those who are contented are happy even though they have to sleep on the ground. Those who are not contented would not be so though they lived in celestial mansions. Such people feel poor even though they are rich, while those who are contented are rich even in poverty. The former are constantly led by their five desires and are greatly pitied by the contented. Such is the meaning of 'contentment'.

3. The virtue of seclusion.

O bhikkhus, seek the joy of quietness and passivity. Avoid confusion and noise and dwell alone in secluded places. Those who dwell in solitude are worshipped with reverence by Sakka and all celestials. This is why you should leave your own and other clans to live alone in quiet places, reflecting (to develop insight) upon dukkha, its arising and its cessation. Those who rejoice in the pleasures of company must bear as well the pains of company, as when many birds flock to a great tree it may wither and collapse. Attachment to worldly things immerses one in the dukkha experienced by all men, like an old elephant bogged down in a swamp from which he cannot extricate himself. Such is the meaning of 'secluding oneself.'

4. The virtue of energetic striving.

O bhikkhus, if you strive diligently, nothing will be difficult for you. As a little water constantly trickling can bore a hole through a rock, so must you always strive energetically. If the mind of a disciple (savaka) becomes idle and inattentive, he will resemble one who tries to make fire by friction but rests before the heat is sufficient. However much he desires fire, he cannot (make even a spark). Such is the meaning of 'energetic striving'.

5. The virtue of attentiveness.

O bhikkhus, seek for a Noble Friend (kalyanamitta). Seek him who will best (be able to) aid you (in developing) the unexcelled and unbroken attention. If you are attentive, none of the (three) robbers, the afflictions, can enter your mind. That is why you must keep your mind in a state of constant attention, for by loss of attention you lose all merits. If your power of attention is very great, though you fall among (conditions favoring) the five robbers of sense-desire, you will not be harmed by them, just as a warrior entering a battle well covered by armor has nothing to fear. Such is the meaning of 'unbroken attention.'

6. The virtue of collectedness (samadhi).

O bhikkhus, if you guard your mind, so guarded the mind will remain in a state of steady collectedness. If your minds are in a state of collectedness, you will be able to understand the arising and passing away of the impermanent world. For this reason you should strive constantly to practice the various stages of absorption (jhana). When one of these states of collectedness is reached, the mind no longer wanders. A disciple who practices (to attain collectedness) is just like an irrigator who properly regulates his dykes. As he guards water, even a small amount, so should you guard the water of wisdom, thereby preventing it from leaking away. Such is the meaning of 'collectedness'.

7. The virtue of wisdom. (PRAJNA)

O bhikkhus, if you have wisdom, then do not hunger to make a display of it. Ever look within yourselves so that you do not fall into any fault. In this way you will be able to attain freedom from (the tangle of) the interior and exterior (spheres of senses and sense-objects--ayatana). If you do not accomplish this you cannot be called Dhamma practitioners, nor yet are you common persons clad in white, so there will be no name to fit you! Wisdom is a firmly -bound raft which will ferry you across the ocean of birth, old age, sickness and death. Again, it is a brilliant light with which to dispel the black obscurity of ignorance. It is a good medicine for all who are ill. It is a sharp axe for cutting down the strangling fig--tree of the afflictions. That is why you should, by the hearing-, thinking- and development-wisdoms increase your benefits (from Dhamma). If you have Insight (vipassana) stemming from (development-wisdom), though your eyes are but fleshly organs you will be able to see clearly (into your own citta.) Such is the meaning of 'wisdom'.

8. The virtue of restraint from idle talk.

O bhikkhus, if you indulge in all sorts of idle discussions then your mind will be full of chaotic thoughts, and though you have gone forth to homelessness you will be unable to attain Freedom. That is why, O bhikkhus, you should immediately cease from chaotic thoughts and idle discussions. If you want to attain the Happiness of Nibbana, you must eliminate completely the illness of idle discussion.

IV. SELF EXERTION

O bhikkhus, as regards all kinds of virtue, you should ever rid yourselves of laxity, as you would flee from a hateful robber. That Dhamma which the greatly-compassionate Lord has taught for your benefit is now concluded, but it is for you to strive diligently to practice this teaching. Whether you live in the mountains or on the great plains, whether you sojourn beneath a tree or in your own secluded dwellings, bear in mind the Dhamma you have received and let none of it be lost. You should always exert yourselves in practicing it diligently, lest you die after wasting a whole lifetime and come to regret it afterwards. I am like a good doctor who, having diagnosed the complaint, prescribes some medicine; but whether it is taken or not, does not depend on the doctor. Again, I am like a good guide who points out the best road; but if, having heard of it, (the enquirer) does not take it, the fault is not with the guide.

V. ON CLEARING UP ALL DOUBTS

O bhikkhus, if you have any doubts regarding the Four Noble Truths: of unsatisfactoriness (dukkha) and the rest, (its arising, its cessation and the Practice-path going to its cessation), you should ask about them at once. Do not harbor such doubts without seeking to resolve them.

On that occasion the Lord spoke thus three times, yet there were none who questioned him. And why was that? Because there were none in that assembly (of bhikkhus) who harbored any doubts.

Then the venerable Anuruddha, seeing what was in the minds of those assembled, respectfully addressed the Buddha thus: 'Lord, the moon may grow hot and the sun may become cold, but the Four Noble Truths proclaimed by the Lord cannot be otherwise. The Truth of Dukkha taught by the Lord describes real dukkha which cannot become happiness. The accumulation of desires truly is the cause of the Arising of Dukkha; there can never be a different cause. If dukkha is destroyed (the Cessation of Dukkha), it is because the cause of dukkha has been destroyed, for if the cause is destroyed the result must also be destroyed. The Practice path going to the Cessation of Dukkha is the true path, nor can there be another. Lord, all these bhikkhus are certain and have no doubts about the Four Noble Truths.

In this assembly, those who have not yet done what should be done (i. e., attained to Enlightenment), will, on seeing the Lord attain Final Nibbana, certainly feel sorrowful. (Among them) those who have newly entered upon the Dhamma-way and who have heard what the Lord has (just said), they will all reach Enlightenment (in due course) seeing Dhamma as clearly as a flash of lightning in the dark of the night. But is there anyone who has done what should be done (being an Arahant), already having crossed over the ocean of dukkha who will think thus: "The Lord has attained Final Nibbana; why was this done so quickly?"

Although the Venerable Anuruddha had thus spoken these words, and the whole assembly had penetrated the meaning of the Four Noble Truths, still the Lord wished to strengthen all in that great assembly. With a mind of infinite compassion he spoke (again) for their benefit.

"O bhikkhus, do not feel grieved. If I were to live in the world for a whole aeon (kappa), my association with you would still come to an end, since a meeting with no parting is an impossibility. The Dhamma is now complete for each and every one, so even if I were to live longer it would be of no benefit at all. Those who were (ready) to cross over, both among the celestials and men, have all without exception attained Enlightenment, while those who have not yet completed their crossing (of the ocean of Samsara to the Further Shore or Nibbana) have already produced the necessary causes (to enable them to do so in course of time).

From now on, all my disciples must continue to practice (in this way) without ceasing, whereby the body of the Tathagata's Dhamma will be ever lasting and indestructible. But as to the world, nothing there is eternal, so that all meeting must be followed by partings. Hence, do not harbor grief, for such (impermanence) is the nature of worldly things. But do strive diligently and quickly seek for Freedom. With the light of Perfect Wisdom destroy the darkness of ignorance, for in this world is nothing strong or enduring.

Now that I am about to attain Final Nibbana, it is like being rid of a terrible sickness. This body is a thing of which we are indeed well rid, an evil thing falsely going by the name of self and sunk in the ocean of birth, disease, old age and death. Can a wise man do aught but rejoice when he is able to rid himself of it, as others might (be glad) when slaying a hateful robber?

O bhikkhus, you should always exert the mind, seeking the Way out (of the Wandering-on, or samsara). All forms in the world, without exception, whether moving or non-moving, are subject to decay and followed by destruction. All of you should stop. It is needless to speak again. Time is passing away. I wish to cross over to Freedom (from existence in this world). These are my very last instructions."

Notes from the editor of the web edition

[1] Around 344-413 AD.

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